



Historic buildings exhibit a number of interesting design details

Urban Design and Public Space Management: Make Downtown a Great Place for People

The broad avenues, dramatic vistas and inviting public spaces conceived by Pierre Charles L'Enfant 200 years ago form the foundation for downtown DC. Today, the L'Enfant Plan continues to guide downtown's growth and development. With proactive management, the wide avenues, public squares, and small plazas in Downtown DC can become the stage for a lively and exciting urban environment.

With strong demand for space and a relatively low building height limit, downtown has spread out and its buildings have bulked up. While the horizontal emphasis has created a unique urban environment, it also requires pedestrians to travel great distances and overcome various obstacles to reach downtown destinations. Physical barriers and closed streets impede the flow of traffic for pedestrians and motorists. Vacant lots, blank walls and poorly designed crosswalks make the pedestrian environment unattractive, uncomfortable, and contribute to concerns about safety. Poorly organized vending, inadequate lighting, and inconsistent street furniture suggest that downtown sidewalks lack a consistent level of quality. New initiatives are needed to create great streets in Downtown DC. With coordinated management and better design, the streets and public spaces in downtown DC can become true destinations for workers, residents, and visitors to our Nation's Capital.



Historic View Down Pennsylvania Avenue

Downtown's historic buildings, landmarks, and monuments have been well-sited under the L'Enfant Plan. The visual richness, variety, and evocative quality of downtown's

historic environment distinguish it from its suburban counterparts. Intact and restored historic buildings also serve as architectural templates for the kinds of development that present pedestrians with an "authentic downtown experience."

The 7th Street corridor is a great example. A stroll down the street reveals layers of history. Nineteenth century buildings provide architectural richness and a pedestrian-friendly, low-rise profile and scale. These buildings, built with high-quality materials and rich detailing, are visually interesting. Their storefront design elements create a sense of "urban vitality", a subtle quality achieved partially through historic detailing, and partially through the design relationships between the street width and building heights, the sidewalk widths, the undulating storefront bays, the transparency of the storefronts, the building materials, and the vitality of the signage.



Good urban design, such as the 800 block of 7th Street, blends old with new and large with small.

These factors create the impression that 7th Street is a dynamic place where interesting things happen; it contrasts sharply with some of the more modern buildings and streetscapes in other parts of the city.

Given the strong demand for space downtown, the challenge is to preserve the historic scale, character, and heritage of these areas, while encouraging sensitive, compatible new development throughout the downtown. The goal is to enhance the physical setting and improve the pedestrian experience—to make downtown pedestrian in scale, colorful, and lively. The design principles that create great streets are well known. Those principles should guide the development and management of public spaces in DC.

Strategy One: Create Great Streets

The great cities of the world are known for having great streets and urban neighborhoods where people gather to relax, socialize, shop, to see and be seen. The key elements that make these streets great are well-known: They are “walkable”. They feature a mix of uses, which generate high levels of pedestrian traffic during the day, evenings, and weekends. They offer great stores and great food, and provide many opportunities for outdoor dining. The buildings and storefronts are architecturally dynamic, but at the ground level, they are designed at a pedestrian scale. Several challenges must be met to establish great streets in Downtown DC:

Simplify Public Space Regulation: There are at least a dozen elements that require some form of regulation or oversight on downtown sidewalks: food and merchandise vending, outdoor dining, sign and storefront design, publication distribution, public performers and public art, street furniture, street lighting, landscaping, trash management, public safety, and public signage. In Washington, there are at least four federal and six District agencies that provide some level of regulation and oversight over these elements. In this environment, it is difficult to make any changes or improvements to the current program. A task force should be established to develop a comprehensive plan and simplify the procedures for public improvements in downtown DC.



900 block of F Street

Develop a set of Downtown Design Guidelines: Guidelines which address the relationship of new development to the street and surrounding urban contexts can help ensure that the public realm is active and visually defined.

Provide for Active Public Space Management: In addition to a clear and simple set of regulatory guidelines, there is also a need for active public space management assis-

tance to help achieve high quality public space amenities. This assistance includes communication, coordination, education and facilitation. Creating a vibrant street life requires high levels of interaction between many interests on a daily basis.

Implement the Downtown DC Streetscape Plan: In 1999, the Downtown DC BID commissioned a streetscape plan, key elements of which have now been adopted by the District government. To improve design quality in downtown DC, a multi-year program to install new streetlights, bike racks, trash receptacles, and benches should be pursued jointly by the District government and the Downtown DC BID. While downtown lighting and street furniture now conform to a common standard, it should be installed on a block-by-block basis to complement existing businesses. Street furniture should change over time to reflect a changing Downtown environment.

Study Programs to Improve Storefronts and Facades: Existing sign regulations and storefront design guidelines may no longer be effective tools for promoting creative design in downtown DC. The current regulations should be reviewed to make sure



they are effective, and provide the flexibility that retailers and restaurants need in today's competitive environment. As a part of the regulatory review, the establishment of mandatory site review for new projects or substantial rehabilitations should also be addressed. Finally, the existing palette of incentives for downtown design improvements should be considered, and new tools should be established to encourage property owners to increase design quality in Downtown DC.

Key Action: Implement the Downtown BID's Public Space Management Program; Organize \$3-5 million annual program for streetscape improvements;



Great streets have interesting building facades and storefronts that are attractive to pedestrians.



This bow-tie park at Massachusetts Avenue and 5th Street will be the site of the new Chinatown Park.

Strategy Two: Provide High-Quality Public Open Spaces

Washington’s unique street layout creates a range of public spaces with potential to become distinct destinations that complement the grand and formal character of the National Mall. If appropriately planned and managed, these public spaces could become “outdoor rooms” for workers, visitors and residents to enjoy. To improve the quality of the open space in downtown DC, a coordinated plan for capital improvements and ongoing management needs to be established, and several important issues addressed.



Program the Open Space at the National Portrait Gallery:

With its southern exposure, wide sidewalks and unimpeded views of Union Station, the National Archives and the Treasury Building, the public space at the Portrait Gallery has the potential to become one of the most active pedestrian areas in Washington. The current sidewalk alignment provides a unique opportunity to reconstruct the historic steps at the gallery entrance and to create a “festival market” where local artists and vendors could sell their wares, and outdoor cafes could add to the

ambiance. A managed vending program could dramatically strengthen the environment at the Portrait Gallery, as well as at other key areas throughout Downtown DC.

Plan for Better Use of Triangular Parks as Gathering Spaces: The L’Enfant Plan has created dozens of small slivers of land that provide an important opportunity for Downtown. In particular, the triangular “bow-tie” parks along Massachusetts and New York Avenues provide an opportunity to connect downtown to adjacent neighborhoods. These parks should be developed as gathering places, as well as sites for sculpture, fountains, and civic art.



Judiciary Square can be restored to a dignified civic district.

Create Dynamic Public Spaces around Mount Vernon and Judiciary Squares, as well as at the Site of the Existing Convention Center:

The new City Museum, which is scheduled to open in 2003 at Mount Vernon Square, will be a magnet for visitors. However, the green space surrounding the building will be heavily used and needs significant improvement. Similarly, the open space around the District Court buildings at Judiciary Square is now used primarily for surface parking. The Office of Planning should work with the National Park Service to develop small area plans to study the potential of strengthening these two key sites.

The existing convention center site offers an opportunity to create a new civic space - a focal point for Washington residents to enjoy and celebrate Downtown.

Key Actions: Encourage streetscape design competitions; Develop Open Space at National Portrait Gallery; Create a significant civic space upon redevelopment of the existing convention center, to serve as an active focal point for the new downtown.

Strategy Three: Preserve Historic Resources

Downtown must preserve its historically significant building inventory and ensure that new development and/or redevelopment complements its historic buildings and open spaces. Specific historic preservation recommendations include:

Revise property tax assessments to reflect actual building sizes: Currently, historic structures that do not fill the entire zoning envelope are taxed as if they do occupy the entire allowable area. Revising this tax policy to reflect actual building sizes would lower operating costs. Likewise, revising the tax policy would help alleviate the pressures on historic structures from a strong Downtown office market, high land costs, the city's height restriction limit, and a preference for buildings with large floor plates.

Alterations and additions to historic landmarks should be compatible with the design, height, proportion, massing, configuration, materials, texture, and colors within historic areas: The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines, available from the DC Historic Preservation Division should be followed. Residents in newly created historic districts (particularly those neighborhoods north of Mt. Vernon Square) should especially be encouraged to reference the Guidelines.

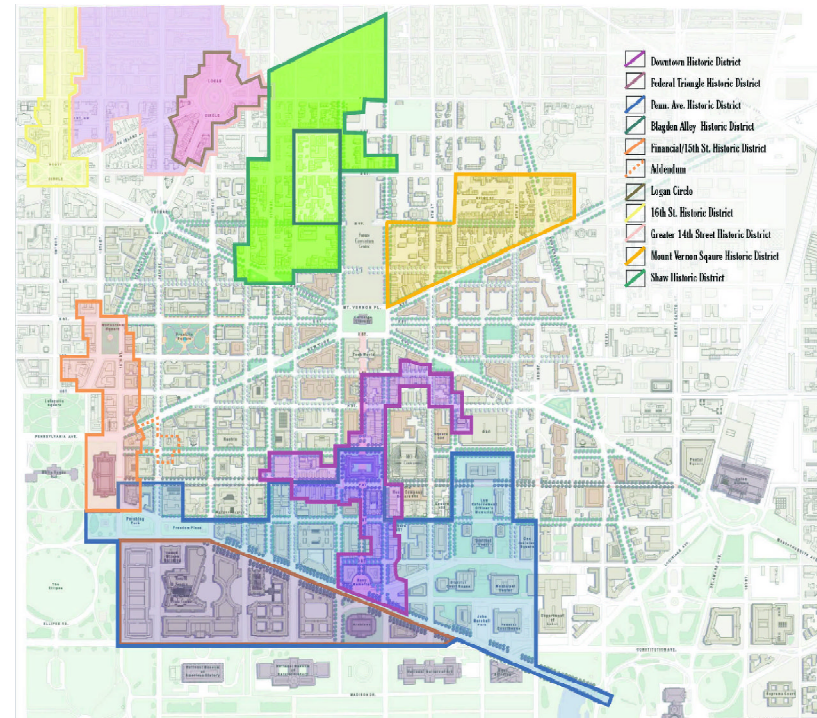
Preserve the original pattern of streets and alleys in downtown DC: The L'Enfant street pattern in Downtown should be preserved and strengthened by reconnecting blocked streets. The 1995 DC Historic Landmark Designation for the L'Enfant Plan of the City of Washington provides guidance for decisions regarding the return of original street patterns and any removals of elements. Alleys that provide off-street service and transportation should be maintained as critical to the understanding and functioning of each city block.

Retain the neighborhood character near the new downtown Convention Center: Development around the new convention center should be designed to maintain the

sense of neighborhood in the adjacent communities. Historic buildings should be preserved and the scale of new construction should be limited on historic sites.

Nominate and designate buildings of merit to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites: These buildings include several sites that have already been determined eligible for listing on the National Register, such as: Seventh Street Savings Bank, Tudor Hall, Immaculate Conception Church, Stong John Thomson School, and the Carpenter's Building.

Secure owner consent for proceeding with the nomination of the 15th Street Financial and Downtown Historic Districts to the National Register of Historic Places: Listing of these two historic districts will officially recognize their significance, as well as provide maximum benefit to local property owners.



There are ten historic districts located within or near Downtown, providing protection for identified areas.



The avenues, streets, squares, circles, and vistas of the L'Enfant Plan are historic resources that should be protected.